

AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Joel 2:21-27

There once was a woman who woke up one morning, looked in the mirror, and noticed she had only three hairs on her head. Well,” she said, “I think I’ll braid my hair today.” So she did and she had a wonderful day. The next day she woke up, looked in the mirror, and saw that she had only two hairs on her head. ”H-M-M,” she said, “I think I’ll part my hair down the middle today.” So she did and she had a grand day. The next day she woke up, looked in the mirror and noticed that she had only one hair on her head.” Well,” she said, “today I’m going to wear my hair in a ponytail.” So she did and she had a fun, fun day. The next day she woke up, looked in the mirror, and noticed that there wasn’t a single hair on her head “YEA!” she exclaimed, “I don’t have to fix my hair today!” Attitude is EVERYTHING!

Our text this morning from Joel is written to a community reeling in pain and in need of hope. I need to give you a little background of what had happened to the people the Prophet is addressing. Though everyone thought “the day of the Lord” was going to be about their deliverance, it turned out to be destruction — on them and not their enemies! A massive swarm of locusts had devoured the land (1:4). Their food and way of life were destroyed. Feed crops were gone, and soon the herds dependent on them would die. The people’s gladness and joy had withered. Their worship was cut off with the destruction of their cereal and wine offerings (1:5-13). They no longer had the very elements they needed for their worship and praise of God. At this point the people were left to groan and mourn their losses. Catastrophe had shattered their lives, their hope and their faith. They would have to try to pick up themselves so they could try to pick up all the pieces.

But into that bleak reality, God speaks. God wanted more from the people than just weeping and wailing; God wanted them! “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing” (2:12-13) How utterly counterintuitive! God had delivered this pain into their lives (v. 25), and he didn’t want their groaning; he wanted them to turn to him in relationship. Their pain was an act of redemption. The catalyst for need. The basis for deeper relationship with God.

I struggled with the thought that God sent this calamity on the people of Israel until I remembered the book of Joel falls into what is known as one of the Apocalyptic books of the Bible. This worldview is grounded in beliefs in supernatural revelations, angels and demons, a world in the grips of evil forces, and impending divine judgment. It also falls under the genre of Old Testament Theology where the wrath and judgment of God was the general understanding the Jewish people had of God’s nature. God was an angry God, not the God of love Jesus came to show us. And yet, people today still cling to this image of a God who sends punishment on God’s people.

Starting in 2:18, the rest of the book of Joel looks into the future. And here we meet the God of compassion and creation. God is going to make all things new and revive the land. Verse 21 - Don’t fear, fertile land; rejoice and be glad, for the Lord is about to do great things! The threshing floors will be full of grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and fresh oil. I will repay you

for the years that the cutting locust, the swarming locust, the hopping locust, and the devouring locust have eaten—my great army, which I sent against you.

Taking what I call a “flat” reading of this text, it does very much appear that God sent calamity on the people of Israel to turn them around and ultimately for them to turn back to God. The only problem with this is how do I reconcile this God of judgment and wrath with the God of Jesus who is a God of love? And, to read this text in this manner fails to take into account the very real presence of evil in our world. It also leads to dangerous speculation that everything in our life has a direct cause and effect. It becomes the age-old Theodicy question which simply asks, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Sometimes things just happen. It is part of our living in a broken world. It is part of that Original Sin I spoke of at Amelia Grace’s Baptism.

All day Wednesday, I wrestled with this text, and the best way to present it to you this morning. I got stuck, so I walked away from it and headed home. Sawyer had a Vet appointment at 5:30 for something minor. While there, I had a long talk with our Vet and she told me Sawyer has Doggy Dementia. His confusion is real and she is not sure just how much is getting through to him. The bad news is, he is really healthy and has a strong heart. This is bad news because ultimately it means I will have to be the one to make the decision when it will be time for him to cross the Rainbow Bridge. Sawyer has been my faithful companion for 10 years. I had been somewhat expecting this, still it was hard to hear.

On the way home the dashboard of my car lit up like a Christmas tree – check engine light, brake light flashing, and every trouble indicator there was brightly lighted!! When I arrive home, I walked into a house filling up with smoke. With the impending storm, Vern was concerned we might lose electricity, so he fired up the wood stove in the basement. The chimneys’ had been inspected on Friday and \$300 dollars later I was told they were clean and did not need cleaning!! Vern and our neighbor tried to get the smoke out of the basement, but soon realized it was far too thick so Vern made a 911 phone call. Four, FOUR Fire Departments responded to the call – the City of Waynesboro; Augusta County, Dooms, and Wilson, along with one rescue vehicle.

Would you be shocked if I told you that God and I were not on speaking terms for the next 24 hours?? Listen to this quote from author Philip Yancey, “One bold message in the Book of Job is that you can say anything to God. Throw at him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal, your disappointment – he can absorb them all. As often as not, spiritual giants of the Bible are shown contending with God. They prefer to go away limping, like Jacob, rather than to shut God out.

Do I look at this series of unfortunate events as some sort of Divine message that I need to get my life in order? Absolutely not. After pondering this through the night I have a whole different take on all of this. Here is what I think. I think that together – you and I –we are seeing good things happening here at Marquis Memorial. The kind of good things which make The Evil one, or The Adversary very, very unhappy. Did God send me these new and very real problems? No! However, the Adversary who is violently against good Christ-like living is much more likely the

culprit. What better way to weaken our shared ministry than to attack your Pastor. What better way to weaken the ministry and witness of the church than to strike down the leadership.

Joel 2 tells the story of God's love for His people. A love in which God gives the people of Israel hope. Isn't the position of Israel the same one we find ourselves in so many times? A loved one battles cancer and despite the prayers of the faithful, he or she dies. A layoff crushes a promising career and brings financial crisis. The kids get bad grades despite the hours we spend on homework with them. You come home to a house filled with smoke!! Our prayers sometimes feel as if they're bouncing off the ceiling. So, what do we do? We have a choice. We always have a choice. Sometimes, like for me last night, we need a time of genuine discouragement; or a good night's sleep. Like the woman in the opening story, we can choose how we respond to the road blocks and challenges in life.

One of the sources I used in my sermon preparation suggests the ABCDEs of changing from discouragement to optimism. They can easily be turned into a practical application for Christians to choose hope over despair.

A: Adverse situations — identify the adverse times you regularly encounter.

B: Beliefs — note all the beliefs about those events that come to mind. Positive or negative.

C: Consequences — reflect on the consequences of living based on those positive and negative beliefs.

D: Disputation — challenge the usefulness of unhealthy beliefs and focus on positive examples of scriptural evidence. For example, rather than looking at your life situations as God's wrath and anger, instead claim the promise from the prophet Jeremiah 29:11. "I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope." Holding on to this, leads perfectly into the final point.

E: "Energization" — be ruthlessly committed to living life based on positive beliefs and disputations of the negative.

Life in our broken world is not easy. Just because we faithfully attend worship and earnestly seek to live Christ-like lives, is no guarantee that we will lead trouble free lives. Look around you this morning. I have not been here long, but I have heard some of your stories, and every one I have heard has had times of great trial and sorrow. This is why we need one another so very much. Most of you have family support you can turn to. Others are not so fortunate.

When you see someone having a difficult time, go and stand by them. Whatever you do, do not try and fix their situation. Do not try and explain the tough time away. Doing so usually does more harm than good. Be present. In Chaplaincy and pastoral care, we call it being a non-anxious presence. Be physically present. Then listen. Listen without offering solutions. Just simply listen.

It does not matter if you have heard their story umpteen times. People struggling with life, desperately need to tell their story. The best gift you can give them is to hold their story gently. Like the woman in our closing story.

Sandra's life had been easy, like a spring breeze. She married a man she loved, they lived in a nice home, and then they were going to have a son. But in the 4th month of her pregnancy, a car accident stole her peace. During the following Thanksgiving week, she would have delivered a son, but now her arms and heart were empty. She barely made it to the florists to pick up a Thanksgiving flower arrangement for her church. Thanksgiving? Thankful for what? She wondered. For a careless driver whose truck was hardly scratched when he rear-ended her? For an airbag that saved her life but took the life of her child? "Good afternoon, can I help you?" The shop clerk startled her. "I ... I need an arrangement," stammered Sandra. "For Thanksgiving? Do you want beautiful or would you like what I call the Thanksgiving "Special?" asked the shop clerk. "What do you mean?" Sandra asked. "I'm convinced flowers tell stories," she continued. "Are you looking for something that conveys 'gratitude' this Thanksgiving?" "Not exactly!" Sandra blurted out. "In the last five months, everything that could go wrong has gone wrong." The shop clerk said, "I have the perfect arrangement for you." She disappeared into the back and came back out with a large bouquet of roses, only these roses had all of the flowers cut off, leaving only the thorny stems. "What kind of flower arrangement is that? Do you expect me to pay for this?" Sandra said. "Not unless you decide you want to. But first hear me out. Several years ago I lost my husband, and for the first time in my life, I spent the holidays alone. I had no children, no husband, no family nearby, and too great a debt to allow any travel." "So what did you do?" asked Sandra. "I learned to be thankful for thorns," answered the clerk quietly. "I've always thanked God for good things in life and never asked Him why those good things happened to me. But when bad stuff hit, boy did I ever ask! It took time for me to learn that dark times are part of our Christian walk – all people experience dark times at some point in their lives. My experience has shown me that thorns make roses more precious. Remember, it was a crown of thorns that Jesus wore so we might know His love." Tears rolled down Sandra's cheeks. For the first time since the accident, she loosened her grip on resentment. "I'll take those twelve long-stemmed thorns, please. What do I owe you?" "Nothing but a promise to allow God to heal your heart. The first year's arrangement is always on me." When Sandra got home, she read the card: "My God, I have never thanked You for my thorns. I have thanked You a thousand times for my roses, but never once for my thorns. Teach me the glory of the cross I bear; teach me the value of my thorns. Show me that I have climbed closer to You along the path of pain. Show me that, through my tears, the colors of Your rainbow shine much more brilliant."

This Thanksgiving, as you gather round your tables wherever you may be, don't forget to thank God for the thorns as well as the joys in your lives.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.